

2012

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### Recommended Citation

Pica, Emily and Verno, Karri (2012) "The changing nature of friendships over the lifespan," *Modern Psychological Studies*: Vol. 17 : No. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholar.utc.edu/mps/vol17/iss2/6>

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# The Changing Nature of Friendships Over The Lifespan

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2010

## Abstract

*The current study examined differences in friendships between younger adults and older adults. One hundred and fifty eight participants completed various measures, which examined the importance of specific friendship qualities. Peer nominations were used to examine the number of close friends, with an additional component added to assess proximity of one's closest friends. Results indicated that both demographic variables and proximity of equal importance for both younger adults and older adults. Results also indicated that both cohorts chose friends close to their own ages. The researchers conclude there are few cohort differences in what younger and older adults value in their friends.*

*Keywords: friendship, lifespan, change, cohort, qualities*

## Introduction

Throughout the lifespan friendships begin and end, taking on different meanings at each stage. As we age, our reasons for selecting our friends change. Some people have the same friends throughout their lives whereas others have different friends at each stage of life. Even though all stages of life are associated with different meanings for friendships, research shows that the closer the two people are in a friendship, the more positive enjoyment they experience (Cheng, Strough, & Swenson, 2001). The current paper will examine friendship differences between younger and older adults.

Hartup (1993) describes a best friend relationship as one characterized by mutual attractions and every day contact. Children describe their friends as others who share their toys with them; whereas adolescents may describe their friends as others who have the same interests, personalities, and play the same sports (Bukowski, Hartup, & Newcomb, 1998). Older adults may base their friendships on intimate, emotionally satisfying relationships because they view their time as limited in comparison to their younger counterparts (Cartensen, Charles, & Isaacowitz, 1999).

## Characteristics Preferred for Friendships

**Children and adolescents.** Keller and Wood (1989) examined how children and adolescents interpret friendship and how this interpretation changes developmentally. Children between the ages of 7 and 15 participated in interviews about friendship conceptions. These interviews were used to examine

how the participants interpreted their friendships (Keller & Wood, 1989). They concluded that during childhood, friendship is based on concrete descriptions such as sharing toys.

Bukowski, Hartup, and Newcomb (1998) found that children base their friendships on similarities in sex, race, age, and activity preference. These similarities are the most important factor in the early stages of friendships. Friendships during childhood are voluntary more so than obligated. Best friends are defined as the friends that the children spend the most time with compared to ordinary friends. Adolescents are more likely to base their friendships on similarities in attitudes, values, self-esteem, social perception, and personality. They base their friendships on these similarities because it validates their own attitudes and beliefs and it allows them to participate in activities that they already enjoy (Bukowski et al., 1998).

Keller and Wood (1989) also looked at friendships among adolescents. They found that as the participants matured into adolescence, so did their cognitive abilities. Adolescents described their friendships by using abstract descriptions such as intimacy, trust, and faithfulness. They had a greater awareness for psychological aspects of friendship, personalities, and rules of reciprocity that govern interaction. Trust became very important, and friendships seemed to be in the same social class.

Harrison and La Greca (2005) examined multiple levels of adolescents' interpersonal functioning such as peer relations and qualities of best friendships. Four hundred twenty-one high school

students completed questionnaires to examine their friendships, qualities of their best friendships, and their social networks. The study found that adolescents rely more on friends for social support than they do family. Friends also help adolescents with protection against social anxiety and depression (Harrison & La Greca, 2005). These researchers further found friendships tend to be reputation-based, and this shows acceptance and power within the larger peer system. An adolescent's reputation is important because it defines who he or she is throughout this developmental period. Peer acceptance is critical when a peer group adheres to a specific reputation; in these cases, peers are permitted to be friends with only similar types of people who fit the group's pre-existing reputation. This is particularly important during adolescence when support and disclosure are of utmost importance when choosing friends.

During adolescence, the qualities that individuals seek in close friendships take on different dimensions. Gender becomes an important feature as do common interests and activities. People tend to befriend others with common interests, such as playing the same sport or in an after school club, because they will have that common interest. Intimacy needs emerge, and adolescents look for a deeper meaning in their friendships. Instead of just looking for someone to share a toy with, adolescents look for someone they can trust and confide in. Behavioral concordances also become important such as school related attitudes, aspirations, and achievements (Hartup, 1993). Hartup also noted that friends socialize each other to become more similar as their friendships grow.

Erikson's psychosocial stages of development might also play a key role in adolescent friendship formation. According to Erikson, adolescents are in the psychosocial stage of identity versus role confusion. This could be the reason that adolescents move from different cliques/friends; they are searching for an identity. Furthermore, having friends and being a part of a larger peer system help with everyday adjustment issues such as self-esteem and emotional regulation (Laser, Lipshultz, & Nevid, 2007).

**Older adults.** Much less is known about the friendship qualities sought by older adults. Few studies have examined what older adults value in new friends. Lawton and Nahemow (1975) conducted a study that looked at friendship qualities among older adults. Their study was composed of volunteers in a retirement home. More than half of the participants reported that they met their current friends in hallways, elevators, and entrance areas of their own building whereas only ten percent met their current friends through an

organized activity such as a senior citizen's club. Eighty-eight percent of the participants lived in the same building, and nearly half of these participants lived on the same floor. This finding helps support the idea that proximity is a key factor in friendship (Lawton & Nahemow, 1975). The proximity factor did not increase with age; however, there was a trend in that direction. The study also found that the quality of similarity was equally powerful. Sixty percent of the participants who were friends were of the same age category, 72 percent were of the same race, and 73 percent were of the same sex (Lawton & Nahemow, 1975). The study also found that a friendship between dissimilar people was common only under conditions of close residential proximity.

Although proximity does seem to play a role in the formation of older adults' friendships, this trend is likely to be impacted by online social networking websites. A recent article by Wagner, Hassanein, and Head (2010) discussed the increasing use of online social networking websites by older adults. Furthermore, according to the Pew Research Group, from 2009- 2010, the number of older adults using social networking sites doubled. With an increase in the number of older adults who use social networking sites, there will likely be a decrease in the need for proximity in relationships. However, there is still clear evidence that adolescents and younger adults use social networking websites much more often than do older adults (Madden, 2010).

Larsen, Mannell, and Zuzanek (1986) conducted research on the daily well-being of older adults with friends and families. Participants in this study utilized electronic pagers to record responses. The older adults completed a self-report of their objective situation and subjective state of mind when the pager beeped. The study found that friendships influenced higher life satisfaction that familial relationships. Friendships strongly influence one's immediate well-being because of the fulfillment one feels in a friendship. Closeness, intimacy, and support were reported as being the central and essential qualities to friendships of the older adults in this study (Larsen et al., 1986).

Larsen and colleagues (1986) also examined the genders individually and found that men were often shallow in their content of discussion with their friends. Friends served as confidantes and a source of support for women. However, most of the friends did not serve as a source of support, rather a source of enjoyment. The participants in the study revealed that their network of friends revolved mainly around shared interests (Larsen et al., 1986).

Jones and Vaughan (1990) examined the relative contributions of personal, affective (feelings), and social exchange characteristics relative to satisfaction with their best friendships. The study consisted of 76 senior adults who were interviewed and given questionnaires to examine the qualities of their best friendships. They concluded that friendships were important in the affective domain because they are an important source of enjoyment (Jones & Vaughan, 1990). They concluded that friendships were important in the personal domain, because highly satisfying friendships are related to higher levels of positivity in their personal lives. Social exchange was found to be important because it provides the older adult a reciprocal relationship. This is important to an older adult's mental well-being because it is not one-sided, and they are receiving friendship, warmth, compassion, and intimacy in return.

Pinquart and Sorensen (2000) looked at how friendships influence social well-being. These researchers theorized that there is risk associated with having an extended network of friends in older adulthood. This risk involves the loss of the social network through widowhood as well as the death of one's peers. They concluded that as individuals age, their social network decreases. They also concluded that older adults report more positive than negative aspects in their relationships which lead to the fact that building friendships may increase self-esteem and contribute to social well-being more so than familial relationships because overloading demands most often come from family rather than friends. (Pinquart & Sorensen, 2000).

The Socioemotional Selectivity Theory, developed by Laura Carstensen, addresses the role of time in predicting the goals that people pursue and the social partners they seek to fulfill them (Cartensen, Charles, & Isaacowitz, 1999). This theory suggests that older adults choose to only maintain very close, emotionally fulfilling relationships. Older adults' inner circles are comprised mostly of old friends and family members who help affirm sense of self and provide social support. They have friendships that are more emotionally satisfying to them because they perceive their time as limited, but still can interact with others; however, they will not put as much energy into the relationship.

Because of the notion that time is limited, the highest priorities among the elderly are social connectedness and social support. Older adults seek out social partners with whom they experience close ties; furthermore, emotional experience is characterized by a greater complexity and a deeper investment into the

friendship. Younger adults perceive time as expansive so they seek out novel social partners instead of familiar social partners because of possible long term pay-offs (Cartensen et al., 1999).

Older adults could be in one of two of Erikson's psychosocial stages: generativity versus stagnation or ego integrity versus despair. Generativity refers to "making your mark" on the world, through caring for others, creating things and accomplishing things that make the world a better place. Despair refers to the failure to find a way to contribute. These individuals may feel disconnected or uninvolved with their community and with society as a whole.

If the older adult were in the generativity versus stagnation stage this could be a reason that older adults like the company of younger adults more so than older adults, they want to pass on their knowledge to the younger generations (Laser et al., 2007).

### Statement of Problem

The past literature suggests there are both differences and similarities between younger adults and older adults in their qualities of friendship. Proximity may be a key quality in both cohorts' friendships because of easy access to one's friends. However, one key difference is that older adults have experienced life and see time as limited whereas younger adults have not fully experienced their lives and see time as expansive which could influence what they look for in a friend.

This paper will examine cohort differences in importance of friendship qualities. Another aim of this paper will be to determine whether older adults seek out more emotionally fulfilling friendships based on the Socioemotional Selectivity Theory compared to adolescents, who might be just as satisfied with peripheral relationships. The quality of proximity will also be examined in both cohorts. The research questions guiding this study are as follows: what do older adults look for in friendships and how do these qualities differ from those of adolescents. We will also explore whether age plays a role in the types of friends that are chosen.

Based on the reviewed literature, we found it reasonable to hypothesize that older adults' friendships will be based less on demographic qualities such as similarities in age, sex, and race than will those of younger adults. In addition to this, we also hypothesized that older adults will tend to befriend younger individuals, to whom they can pass their knowledge, thus displaying generativity. As for younger adults, we hypothesized that they will place



less importance on proximity compared to older adults, who prefer to keep their social networks close to them. Lastly, we hypothesized that older adults will search for friendships that are more emotionally fulfilling for them compared to adolescents according to the Socioemotional Selectivity Theory.

## Method

### Participants

Young adults and older adults were the primary focus of the current study. A total of 158 participants were included with 99 young adults and 59 older adults. There were 82 female participants and 76 male participants. Younger adult participants were recruited through an introductory course at Mansfield University. The older adult participants were recruited through local senior centers. The older adults lived at home and visited these senior centers on a weekly basis. The younger adult cohort had a mean age of 21.31 (SD = 6.30). The older adults had a mean age of 72.36 (SD = 7.50).

### Materials

To look for the qualities of friendship that are most important to the participants, they completed a 3-part survey (see Appendix A). The first part of the survey consisted of individual demographics. The second part of the survey consisted of Likert-type questions concerning how much a specific friendship quality or characteristic was important to the participant's perception of friendship. The scale ranged from 1 through 7, 1 being not at all important and 7 being extremely important. The third part of the survey consisted of peer nominations of one's closest friends. Participants reported, in a list form, their 3 closest friends. The peer nominations included age, gender, and how close they live to these friends (indicating proximity).

### Procedure

After obtaining IRB approval, the younger adults were recruited from large, introductory psychology classes at a mid-sized university. The participants received extra credit points in exchange for their participation in the study. After signing the consent form, the participants completed the surveys, which took approximately 20 minutes. The older adults were recruited at local senior centers while they were participating in weekly activities. The researcher approached the director of each center and made arrangements for the surveys to be distributed and collected. After reading and signing the consent form,

the older adults completed the surveys, which took approximately 30 minutes.

## Results

The first hypothesis stated that older adults' friendships will be based less on demographic qualities than younger adults. This hypothesis was tested through a series of analyses of variance, and no main effects were found (see Table 1). Younger adults did not rate importance of having friends of the same age, race, gender, differently than did the older adults.

The second hypothesis stated that older adults will tend to befriend others in which they can pass their knowledge to. Based on the results of the peer nomination process, we categorized participants' friends as being part of a younger adult cohort (under 40 years old), a middle-aged adult cohort (41-60 years old) or an older adult cohort (61 years or older). This hypothesis was tested through a chi-square and was supported. The results indicated that younger adults were more likely to be friends with same age peers, but older adults were almost equally likely to be friends with *both* same-age peers (i.e., other who are also 60 and older) and middle age individuals,  $\chi^2(2, N=156)=135.898, p<0.01$  (see Table 2).

The third hypothesis stated that for younger adults, proximity of friends will not be as important as it is to older adults. We hypothesize this because young adults are likely to have friends with whom they mainly interact on social networking sites such as Facebook. Older adults will not have these kinds of friendships and will focus more importance on friendships with those who live close by. This hypothesis was not supported,  $t(156) = 1.16, p = .246$ . Both age groups rated proximity as a fairly unimportant factor in friendship formation. Older adults gave the item an average rating of 2.49 (SD = 1.55) and younger adults rated the item on average of 2.79 (SD = 1.54).

The fourth hypothesis stated that based on the Socioemotional Selectivity Theory, older adults will search for friendships that are more emotionally fulfilling. The two cohorts were compared on their ratings of emotional fulfillment, intimate exchange, and sensitivity. No main effects were found for emotional fulfillment or intimate exchange. However, significant cohort differences were found for ratings of sensitivity,  $t(154) = 2.33, p = .021$ . Older adults gave the item an average rating of 4.97 (SD = 1.53) and younger adults rated the item on average of 4.36 (SD = 1.60). Older adults found sensitivity to be an important aspect of their friendship.

## Discussion

### Summary

The current study showed that older and younger adults have very similar attitudes about which characteristics of friends are most important. First, older and younger adults showed similar ratings of importance for proximity as a key factor for friendships. Older adults' friendships were not based less on demographics than younger adults, as was hypothesized, and they did not tend to befriend others in which they can pass their knowledge to. Rather, they tended to befriend people of similar ages. Older and younger adults had showed no preference for proximity when choosing friends. Also, this study concluded that older adults do not search for friendships that are more emotionally fulfilling to them, but they are more concerned with sensitivity as a characteristic of friendships compared to younger adults.

### Interpretation

The first hypothesis of the current study involved older adults basing their friendships on demographic qualities more so than younger adults. This hypothesis was not supported and could be in part due to the uprising technology. Social networking has become very popular. Social networking allows a person to keep in touch with friends and family with a simple click of a button. Because of this easy access to communicate, demographic qualities may no longer hold as much importance as they did when the older adults were younger.

This corresponds to the findings of Bukowski, Hartup, and Newcomb (1998). They found in their study that children base their friendships on demographic similarities; however, as they mature, adolescents base their friendships on similarities in attitudes, values, and self-esteem. Bukowski and colleagues' (1998) findings show that there is a trend that as we age, demographic qualities become less important. Instead of demographic qualities, proximity may be more important to older adults because it is harder for them to move around and get out of the house. Yet, in the current study, proximity was given a relatively low rating.

Hypothesis two stated that older adults will tend to befriend those that are younger than them so they are able to pass their knowledge on to future generations. This hypothesis was supported; older adults were split between having same-age friends and friends who were in the next-youngest age group. Very

few older adults reported being friends with young adults. One explanation is that the older adults were in the midst of the Eriksonian stage of generativity versus stagnation, and they were actively choosing younger people to befriend. Perhaps they do feel a need to pass along knowledge to the next generation, and they did so by befriending individuals who are in the middle age developmental period. However, older adults were also likely to have just as many (and slightly more) same-age peers. These individuals might have surpassed the generativity vs. stagnation phase and are now in the integrity vs. despair stages, being content to keep only their close, same-age friends.

A different reason for this finding could be that younger adults live in a much faster paced society than in the past. Younger adults are always on the go; they are either at school, sports practice, work, or simply doing homework. On weekends, younger adults can usually be found with either their family or friends. Because of this, younger adults do not see the need to take the time out of their busy schedule to befriend an older adult outside their family.

Hypothesis three stated that proximity will play a key role in friendship formation among both the younger and older adults. This hypothesis was not supported which is in contrast to the study completed by Hartup (1993). It was concluded that adolescents spend a lot of time with their friends both in and out of school because of proximity. In our study, proximity was relatively unimportant to both cohorts. This may not be the key reason an adolescent chooses someone to be his or her friend; however, it does help in the process of choosing friends. The parent of a young child influences friendship choices. Play dates for young children are often at a neighbor's house or someone who lives close by.

Lawton and Nahemow (1975) found that proximity was critical in friendship among older adults. Proximity plays a key role in friendship formation among older adults because they are less mobile than when they were younger. Friends that live close by are much easier to access and physically meet with in comparison to friends who 30 miles or more away. However, older adults are using websites more frequently (Madden, 2010; Wagner et al., 2010), thereby downplaying the importance of proximity as a key factor in friendships. This could explain the relatively low importance placed on this item by older adults.

Hypothesis four stated that based on the Socioemotional Selectivity Theory, older adults will search for friendships that are more emotionally

fulfilling to them. These results are similar to the results of the study Lawton and Nahemow (1975) conducted. Over half of their participants had friends of the same age group. This was due to the proximity factor; most of these friendships were formed because these people lived in the same residence. Furthermore, most of these participants lived on the same floor as their friends in which they were around each other on a daily basis for an entire semester.

This could also be due to the fact of a much faster-paced life today. Younger adults do not see the need to socialize with older adults because they are busy with socializing with their peers, after school sports, working, or the occasional college party. Because of this, older adults do not come in contact with many younger adults during the final stage of their life. Young adults are seeking novel experiences with other peers their age (Cartensen, Charles, & Isaacowitz, 1999).

### Limitations

The age range between the younger and older adults may have inhibited the results. College freshman can range from ages 18 and up; a younger adult cohort could have been used. For example, high school juniors and seniors would range from ages 16-18 which would be a younger cohort, and it would also have a definite

age range. A third limitation is the questionnaire might have been too time consuming for the older adult cohort, and it interfered with their daily activities.

### Future Directions

One possible future direction is to examine a younger cohort for the younger adults. The current study examined college level students and their ages can range from 18-22 and also the ages can vary because of the non-traditional students. If a younger cohort were to be used, I believe that the results would be different, showing more cohort differences. In addition to this younger cohort, another young adult cohort could be used as well. Two young cohorts with ages 9-12 and 15-18 would show not only how friendships differ between younger and older adults, but it would also show differences between pre-teenage friendships as well.

Another future direction would be to try and use a community center where a numerous amount of older adults are going to be at one time. This would help because if any single person needed help with understanding a question, the researcher would be right there in the same room to help with any questions. This would help avoid participants guessing at what they believe a certain question to mean. Was race or education levels a factor?

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**Table 1***Age Differences in Importance of Demographic Factors when Choosing Friends*

Variable	Mean (younger)	Mean (older)	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	
Same Age	2.25 (1.45)	2.33 (1.77)		.11	.740
Same Sex	1.61 (.97)	1.93 (1.45)		2.68	.104
Same Race	1.60 (1.45)	1.81 (1.46)		.75	.386
Proximity	2.78 (1.54)	2.49 (1.56)		1.36	.246

*Note.* Standard deviation in parentheses.**Table 2***Crosstabulation of Participant's Age and Age of Closest Friends*

Age of Participant	Friend's Age		
	Less than 40	41-60	60 or older
Younger Adults	95	2	2
Older Adults	1	15	41